

Ask Professor Sarah Bellum

Professor Sarah Bellum answers your questions on navigating the often-uncharted waters of early career development. Professor Bellum was inspired by Ms. Mentor, a column by *Emily Toth* appearing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and is written by *Patricia L. Clark*, chair of the Early Careers Committee. Do you have a question for Professor Bellum? Send it to sarah_bellum@biophysics.org. Your privacy is assured!

Why Won't She...

Q : I need some career guidance (my thesis advisor and I aren't hitting it off right now), so I searched my department for another faculty member who might help me right now. The only problem is, she doesn't seem to have any interest in talking to me, much less acting like a mentor! What's her problem? I thought faculty were here, and wanted, to help students. How can I persuade her to mentor me?

— *Mentor-less in Minnesota*

A : This letter rings several of Professor Bellum's alarm bells. By what criteria did you identify this woman? In particular, be very careful if the answer—truthfully—is "she's the closest faculty member to my age" and/or "she's female." While these are both fairly common reasons for identifying a particular faculty member as a possible mentor, neither one predisposes a successful mentor/mentee relationship. In fact, they can often have just the opposite effect.

Young faculty members are usually new faculty members, and they often have very little experience with mentoring graduate students. As a result, they may be uncomfortable offering advice to people outside of their own lab, particularly students that they do not know very well. So, despite seeming like an easy choice because of the relatively small age gap, you may find a more receptive audience if you try talking to a more intermediate-level faculty member. Professor Bellum suggests finding someone with tenure, if possible. This

guarantees the professor will have at least some experience mentoring students. In addition, if the point of contention between you and your advisor involves particularly inappropriate actions on the part of your advisor (some examples: gross mishandling of your research project, inappropriate use of funds, plagiarism, or sexual misconduct), you will probably be better served by having a tenured advocate on your side.

Why does approaching a female faculty member ring Professor Bellum's bells? It's not clear from your letter whether you yourself are female, but it is important to remember that female faculty members can often become a beacon to female graduate students. Most science departments have few female professors, but many more female graduate students. It is natural for a female student to view the few female professors as role models of a certain sort, but this can create a strain if you assume it also includes a

mentoring relationship. It's sad but true: some female faculty members, particularly young ones, may shy away from serving as an unofficial mentor to female students. This can happen for a variety of reasons: perhaps, despite your common gender, she does not feel that the two of you have enough in common (or she has enough familiarity with your situation) that she can be of use to you. She may shy away from serving as a leader among female students: who, after all, is really comfortable with being perceived as 'a beacon'? Or, maybe her beacon light is shining so brightly that she is already embroiled in a lighthouse-full of unofficial mentoring relationships.

Perhaps she has come out of her own training experiences with an "if I can do it, any woman can do it" attitude, and be particularly unsympathetic to the plights of female students. Fortunately, as female faculty members reach more senior status, they typically tend to shed the more negative

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attitudes, and realize the valuable impact they can have on the progress of young students' (particularly female students') careers.

A similar situation may occur even if you are a male student: younger women in positions of authority are often sensitive, sometimes to the point of hypersensitivity, about being placed in what they perceive as a stereotypical "woman as nurturer" role. They may worry that

taking on such commitments will only create additional burdens on their overburdened lives, and

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only detract from getting their research program more firmly established. They may also be leery (and quite rightly so) of getting caught up in a potentially ugly battle between a student and another faculty member. Again, these are all good reasons to identify a more established, preferably tenured, professor for consultation.

But what if, in your case, the faculty member is an established member of the old guard? This brings us to another of Professor Bellum's alarm bells: What prior relationship or knowledge have

the two of you had with one another? You mention she has no interest in acting as your mentor: to put it bluntly, why should she?

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Perhaps

you are expecting too much, to soon, from an informal acquaintance.

Finally, what is the nature of the problem between you and your thesis advisor? You mention you need 'career guidance'; you allude to tension in the relationship between you and your advisor.

Professor Bellum wonders whether the conflict has developed over that age-old problem: the struggle over when and how to wrap up a thesis project, or write a dissertation.

Unfortunately, by the time a graduate student and PI have spent multiple years involved with a student's dissertation research, it is all too easy for one or both parties to lose their objectivity about the project and its conclusion.

Communication is key here, as it is in all stages of a dissertation project: you

and your advisor need to have a series of conversations about the project, including what constitutes a 'finished' project.

These conversations are especially critical, given the open-ended nature of most scientific research: ideally, your dissertation project is opening up multiple research

directions, and may even have generated more questions than answers. Use the conversations with your advisor to clarify which additional experiments must fall under the purview of your project, and which are better left for follow-up projects for other student(s). This kind of clarity—which can be initially painful if it reveals a sharp disconnect between your ideas and your advisor's—is a prerequisite for concluding your graduate studies under a sunny sky, instead of a storm cloud. That's important for your own peace of mind, now and in the future. After all, you will most likely be looking for letters of recommendation from your advisor, perhaps for a very long time after graduation.

Do everything you can to keep the graduate student/advisor relationship strong, and if you need outside advice, seek it from a tenured, sympathetic ear that knows you well.

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